

War Without End

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IF PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON HADN'T HAD firsthand experience with poverty and racism in Texas, he might never have come around to civil rights, or declared his War on Poverty. When he was just 20 years old, Johnson took a year off from college to teach middle school in the Hispanic farming community of Cotulla in South Texas. In his speech to Congress on March 15, 1965 (given in the wake of the deadly civil rights violence in Selma), LBJ talked about how his poor and often hungry students “knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them, but they knew it was so because I saw it in their eyes.”

Clayson brings LBJ's signature efforts back home, offering Texas as a case study of how the War on Poverty affected widespread urban and rural poverty in the South. Whites who held power and Latinos who felt they were shortchanged on benefits criticized Great Society programs for placating angry blacks who had rioted in major cities during 1965. However, as Clayson demonstrates, the fundamental principle of his Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was encouraging opportunity through community initiatives. The Community Action Program targeted large cities with concentrations of poor people and well-developed church and city government organizations to help the poor learn how to help themselves.

The picture in Texas was not pretty. For political reasons, state governors were given veto power over initiatives. Gov. John Connally, a Johnson protégé who “had to win elections in a state in which few minorities could vote and civil rights legislation was widely opposed by whites,” argued that federal anti-poverty programs were intrusive, that “voluntary desegregation” had made “dramatic progress,” and that federal laws weren’t needed to “tell us how to do things we’re doing already.” Connally vetoed a proposed Neighborhood Youth Corps project in the Rio Grande Valley. Organized by the Texas Farmers Union, a state affiliate of the United Farm Workers, it planned to employ 790 youths in 33 counties and to pay them \$1.25 an hour. Connally objected that the \$1.25 wage was 25 cents more than their parents made for the same work. The *Observer* satirized the veto at the time by having Connally argue that “a dollar and twenty-five cents an hour would ruin the economy of Texas.”

Bexar County Commissioner Albert Peña and leaders of the American GI Forum complained justifiably that the “War on Poverty offered the least to Mexican Americans.” Older Mexican Americans, Clayson writes, believed in “integration and patriotism as the most prudent paths toward economic and political empowerment.” Younger and more militant Chicanos believed that “integration meant forgetting the discrimination, abuse and theft that had defined life for Mexicans in the United States.” Both groups found themselves cut out of decision-making because “Anglos could not overcome their inherent ethnocentrism.” Armando Rendon in the *Chicano Manifesto* proclaimed that the “gringo pseudoliberals and guilt ridden do-gooders” of the OEO were “trying to solve the problems of the barrios with a complete disregard for the values of the culture.”

Clayson is sober about the results of the War on Poverty. Though the number of families living below poverty level in Texas declined from 30 percent to 17 percent between 1960 and 1970, the economic prosperity of the country, sizable increases in social welfare spending and federal aid to the elderly were the major factors in reducing the number of poor citizens. Service-oriented community action programs and the efforts of Volunteers in Service to America produced no “absolute statistical proof that people moved out of poverty because of federal spending.” Head Start participants did not track as getting higher grades, nor did Job Corps participants end up with measurably higher incomes.

Some failures, Clayson makes clear, had to do with entrenched local leaders wanting to hold onto economic and political power. For example, city hall in Houston is characterized as having “no interest in using the War on Poverty to promote real social change.” Other cities, like San Antonio, seem to have benefited more because of organized minority activism. Clayson thinks programs like Head Start and the Job Corps were successful mainly for bringing hope to “a clientele that nearly every other institution in America had abandoned.” He also believes the War on Poverty fostered a recognition of the value of cultural diversity in government and education, and a sense that those in need deserve assistance. In closing, he reminds liberals that “it is more important than ever to renew the fight against poverty.”

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